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SACRAMENTALISM AND MYSTICISM IN EARLY
CHRISTIANITY

Two recent books—one by W. M. Groton,¹ dean of the Divinity School of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, and the other by W. F. Cobb,² rector of St. Ethelburga's in the City of London—deal with certain features of early Christianity in the light of the religious status of the contemporary Greco-Roman world. The former discusses mainly the sacramental phases of the new religion, while the latter is chiefly concerned with its mystical basis.

Groton's main topics are the primitive cult meal, the Gnostic eucharist, the eucharistic rite in the mystery-religions, the eucharist—pagan and Christian, the eucharist in the New Testament, and the eucharist in the primitive church. In contrast with Clemens and others who deny that sacramentalism occupied any large place within the earliest Christianity, Groton finds it prominently present from the start. Nor was it introduced from the pagan cults. The mystery-religions, so he thinks, had no influential existence in the first century A.D., and when they did come into contact with Christianity its sacramental features preserved their own distinctiveness. Ultimately they go back to Jesus himself; they were passed on to Paul by the primitive church, and were perpetuated by the expanding church of the apostolic age. While the Roman church is admitted to have overstressed sacraments, Protestantism is thought to have gravely erred in emphasizing so pre-eminently the individualistic side of religion—"when all recognize that the sacramental side of religion is as essential to its complete efficacy as the individualistic, the hope of Church unity will be bright." The author looks for the realization of his hope in a purified Romanism, which with the advancing light of knowledge is nowadays rapidly sloughing off the elements of paganism which it absorbed in post-apostolic times. As this process nears completion Catholicism becomes once more comprehensive in fact as well as in theory and the term Protestantism will no longer be needed (p. 197). The book throughout is conspicuously lacking in scientific historical method.

For Cobb, mystical experience is the essential thing in religion—this is *life*, while doctrinal postulates and ecclesiastical rites are *form*. He does not wish to reject the form but to make it effective by translating

¹ *The Christian Eucharist and the Pagan Cults.* By W. M. Groton. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1914. xiii+203 pages. \$1.20.

² *Mysticism and the Creed.* By W. F. Cobb. New York: Macmillan, 1914. xxii+559 pages. \$3.00.

it into terms of the individual's inner experience. From this stand-point he proceeds to estimate the Apostles' Creed: "At the back of this creed and of every creed, at the back of every utterance in the Bible, at the back of all philosophies, and of all religious practices, there reposes a revelation given at first-hand to him who in the last analysis is responsible for the creed or parable or philosophy or ceremony" (pp. 41 f.). But the essence of the "revelation" is the experience, of which the *form* may be a very imperfect or, indeed, a wholly inadequate, expression.

Each article of the Apostles' Creed is taken up in turn and interpreted from this point of view. We may illustrate the procedure from the treatment of the "Third Article"—the Virgin-birth. The author rejects at the start all notion of miracle in the traditional sense of the term. Nobody "with a tincture of modern thought" can any longer believe in the miraculous; the law of causality "rules without exception in the whole field of our experience" (p. vii). Hence the significance of the Virgin-birth is not to be sought in any supposed occurrence of the event, but in the mystic experiential fact which the story of the Virgin-birth symbolizes. The "experiential fact"—even though there never was any corresponding historic event, nor could it have had any truly religious significance had such an event occurred—is widely attested in the stories of divine parentage and Virgin-births among pagans. There is, we are told, a pervasive type of religious experience which is truly symbolized by these narratives, that experience being the supernatural birth of the individual within the inner realm of mystical reality. But the Christian experience is not on a perfect level with that of the pagan—"what in others was a guess, or a foregleam, was in Christianity true" (p. 145). This does not mean "true" in the sense of being historic fact, but ideal mystical experience. Hence "conceived by the Holy Ghost" is only another way of saying that he who is in the kingdom of heaven—and Jesus pre-eminently—has been born from above; and this is a *Virgin-birth*, since "no one can be born from above who does not come with a virgin soul, virgin in the sense of being pure from all self-seeking, at least in desire, and not in the sense of never having tasted of the forbidden fruit" (pp. 150 f.).

In this way the author thinks he can give us the original meaning of the various articles of the Apostles' Creed; this furnishes him the key to the numerous similarities which he recognizes between early Christianity and contemporary pagan faiths; he also finds here not only the true significance of the Apostles' Creed but of other doctrines, as well as the ordinances of the church; and this line of reasoning gives, he thinks, a

sure basis for condemning those who propose to abandon past doctrines or forms as no longer valid. For example, we are told that "the thoughtful mind will view the relegation of the symbol of the Mother and Child to obscurity or contumely as a blunder of the first magnitude on the part of the Protestant world" (p. 153). This is the inevitable conclusion, the author affirms, "if there is any solid ground in Reality" for his interpretation. But that is just the point at which his readers will feel doubtful. He has taken a wholly uncritical attitude toward the problems of the psychology of religious experience; by a process of liberal allegorizing he has read into the thinking of the first-century Christians ideas entirely foreign to their age; and he has affirmed the universality of a type of religious experience and thinking which is by no means universal.

SHIRLEY JACKSON CASE

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

BRIGGS'S THEOLOGICAL SYMBOLICS

Dr. Briggs's volume,¹ which is introduced by a model preface from the pen of President Francis Brown, appeared shortly after the author's death, but had the benefit of his final corrections. It is one of three volumes produced by the same active brain in recent years in interpretation of the doctrinal differences and agreements of Christendom, the other two being *Christian Unity* (1909) and *Fundamental Christian Faith* (1913). The *Theological Symbolics*, the product of prolonged studies, is divided into three parts of almost equal length, Fundamental, Particular, and Comparative Symbolics. The first takes up the three creeds of the early church and the Chalcedonian statement. In the second part the author treats the symbolic definitions of the church during the Middle Ages and the confessional statements since the outbreak of the Reformation in western Christendom, "in their origin and history," as separate entities. The third part, Comparative Symbolics, sets forth the doctrinal differences in western Christendom.

In general, it is to be said that Dr. Briggs's wide sweep over the symbolic field is that of the thoroughly informed expert; his treasures of learning are evident; his introduction of details imparts life to the discussion; his independence of judgment is everywhere apparent. If the standpoint is that of Catholic Christianity, with some leaning toward

¹ *Theological Symbolics*. By Charles A. Briggs. New York: Scribner, 1914. 429 pages. \$2.50.